Digital Technology: Transforming the Yearbook Industry
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Introduction

The yearbook market is on the cusp of a major technological transformation that promises to improve quality, content, personalization capabilities, delivery, and student engagement. Technology platforms to produce personalized yearbooks on-demand have been quietly in use, steadily rewriting the yearbook market and opening new distribution models (including the emergence of e-yearbooks).

Yearbook advisors and the students face a number of obstacles when it comes to working with traditional publishers that have not evolved their production manufacturing platforms or business practices. The yearbook market has been historically dominated and supported by a small handful of legacy publishers that have established deep roots in the school community. This has enabled them to build market share and a very large support structure of sales reps, yearbook camps, and classroom curriculums. Despite the entrenched old-school yearbook business models, schools are pursuing new alternatives to re-vitalize yearbooks, combatting economic pressures and preserving memories in print and electronic media.

The Yearbook: A Quick History

The yearbook is an American tradition that has changed very little over the past century, in terms of business model as well as format. The yearbook dates back to the mid-1800s, when photographers persuaded college students to buy portrait images and share them with each other. The students would collect portraits of one another, and the collection of portraits would be bound into an album. The business model progressed and soon professional photographers were recording school moments through individual portraits, class portraits, and extracurricular club/sporting event photos. These images were then bound into a formal yearbook and sold as a collection to the students. The images below provide examples of early yearbooks. From left to right, we see the front and back covers from an 1860 Rutgers College yearbook, a class photo from the 1890s, and a chemistry club photo from 1905.

Figure 1: Examples of Yearbooks from 1860-1905

Fast-forward 100 years, and very little about the yearbook format and business model has actually changed. The yearbook is still a bound static book containing portraits, class pictures, and images of extracurricular clubs/sporting events that are mass-produced and
sold to students. The most significant changes to the yearbook have been the introduction of four-color printing and the implementation of desktop publishing to design and organize pages. The images below show yearbooks from the 1970s to 2011.

Figure 2: Examples of Yearbooks from 1970-2011

While the format and business models for yearbooks have not changed dramatically in over a century, online and social media as well as a weak economy are beginning to challenge the traditional yearbook format.

The Challenge: Old Practices are Inflexible and Expensive

The traditional yearbook creation process is complicated and time-consuming. Yearbook advisors and students face a number of hurdles when working with publishers using traditional print technology and legacy business practices. These obstacles are outlined in greater detail below.

Lengthy Production Cycles Intensify Deadline Pressures

The historical yearbook production model offers a short timeframe for schools to meet deadlines. Legacy publishers need a three-month window to manufacture and deliver yearbooks, which means that files must be submitted to the publisher by March to meet end-of-year delivery times. This leaves the yearbook staff only six months to create and assemble content. In addition to gathering portraits, class pictures, and group photographs, the staff must also capture photos of sporting events, homecoming, and extra-curricular activities. Proofs of the yearbook need to be made, content and images must be thoroughly reviewed, and the yearbook needs to be approved before the final files are sent to the publisher. A missed deadline can cause shifts or delays in production schedules. These delays can result in significant price increases and jeopardize on-time yearbook delivery.

Edits and Changes are Expensive

Once the files are submitted and proofs are made, any changes or edits to the files are made at the school’s expense. Color corrections, type changes, image edits, and more cost the school money. Traditional yearbook publishers view corrections and edits as an opportunity to increase revenues. Given the deadline challenges, the cost to make edits can be substantial as publishers are able to charge a premium for them.
The Missing One-Third

Since file deadlines typically occur around March, this means that the final one-third of the school year cannot be captured and incorporated into the yearbook. Spring sports, proms, and graduation photos are unable to make their way into the current yearbook. Some schools will include this content in the following year’s yearbook, while others may be able to fund an addendum that is produced and mailed to students.

Volume Commitments Are Inconsistent with Demand

With traditional business models, high schools are forced to estimate demand without a clear picture of the exact number of yearbooks that would actually be ordered. Traditionally, money is paid in advance to the publisher, and yearbook advisors may not have a budget. Contracts are negotiated based on the anticipated volume of yearbooks that will be sold. Yearbooks are pre-sold early in the year, with the money transferring to the publisher in installments throughout the year.

All costs of a yearbook are established upfront in the contract, and any additional costs incurred are billed as line item costs. Changes to the yearbook after files have been submitted to the publisher, additional rounds of proofs, and missed deadlines can cause a school to run over its yearbook budget. Ad space is commonly sold in the yearbook, as well as various fundraising efforts, to help offset some of the production costs.

If there are any unsold yearbooks, the cost of those yearbooks are the responsibility of the school, or at the discretion of the publisher will be carried over and built into the following years yearbook cost. This protects the school from paying any unexpected out-of-pocket expenses, while helping the publisher to ensure repeat business from the school. Traditional yearbook publishers advise schools to expect either a 5% overage or shortage of yearbooks. In turn, schools will typically order extra yearbooks so that students that failed to place an initial order for a book will still be able to purchase one. In many instances, the result is a closet (or multiple closets) full of unsold books.

A Better Solution: Yearbooks Produced On Demand

The ability to produce yearbooks through digital workflows and print them on digital printing devices is beginning to disrupt and displace old-school models that are no longer making the grade. Digital print technology enables schools to produce the precise number of yearbooks required “on demand.” This eliminates excess yearbooks that waste budget dollars, while also negating pre-order commitments. Schools can order as few or as many yearbooks as needed, and the per-yearbook price typically never changes. Unlike conventional yearbook publishers, organizations using digital print solutions offer the opportunity for students create unlimited custom pages and a cover for their personalized yearbook, transforming it into a more relevant, meaningful, valuable, and affordable heirloom. Imagine giving every student the opportunity to own a yearbook that is uniquely linked with his/her school experiences.
Of equal importance is the creative process. There are now Cloud-based Internet tools that let the yearbook staff easily create top-quality printed yearbooks. These “drag and drop” solutions require limited design or printing skills. In addition, these tools support collaboration and allow multiple students to work on a yearbook at the same time, under the supervision of their yearbook advisor. The end objective is to make the entire process simpler and more efficient for advisors and the yearbook staff.

**South Lake High School Embraces a New Yearbook Model**

South Lake High School (Groveland, FL) turned to on-demand digital yearbook production to rein in costs, improve production efficiency, and bring its students high-quality affordable yearbooks. This school is located in an economically depressed area. Like many schools around the country, it is tasked with making limited resources stretch as far as possible. When the school was suddenly faced with a yearbook debt of $10,000, its new yearbook advisor began exploring options. Kelsey Arons, an AP Language/Composition and English III teacher at South Lake High School and *Teacher of the Year* for 2013-14, assumed the role of yearbook advisor and discovered that she had inherited significant problems from her predecessor.

Arons recalls, “I was amazed at exactly how problematic the yearbook program had become. The 2011-2012 yearbook—which was initially designed as a cost-neutral initiative—was $6,000 in the red. On top of that, there were quality issues. It was going to take a significant amount of money to fix the errors, which included dozens of grammar mistakes, missing senior pictures, student photos in the wrong sections of the book, and perhaps most glaring—a front cover that belonged on the back and a back cover that belonged on the front.”

With such a high number of errors, Arons knew that the school’s debt would grow because dissatisfied students would demand refunds or replacements. Raising the price of the yearbook to cover debt was not an option that Arons was willing to consider. She explains, “I knew there had to be a way to give all of our students a great yearbook at a price they could afford. When I was in high school, I was one of the kids who didn’t get a yearbook. There’s no way that was going to happen now that I was Yearbook Advisor... not on my watch!”

At that time, Arons approached her now former yearbook publisher for guidance. They recommended that she roll over the debt into a new contract; a tactic that she continues to find baffling. “Instead of finding ways to lower or eliminate our debt, they were advising us to compound it. Well, that simply wasn’t acceptable to me,” Arons states.

After researching publishing and production alternatives on the Internet, Arons found Picaboo Yearbooks. She sent a note to company President Bryan Payne, and his response took the school’s situation in a 180-degree turn for the better.
About Picaboo
Picaboo Yearbooks is a division of online photo merchandise provider Picaboo (Silicon Valley, CA). After successfully providing consumers with quality photo books, greeting cards, calendars, and posters, the company entered the yearbook market in February 2012.

According to Bryan Payne, “We decided to leverage our technology and expand into the multi-billion dollar yearbook industry. This is part of our long-term vision to provide schools, parents of home-schooled children, community organizations, and other groups in local communities across the country with a personalized, simplified, and on-demand yearbook solution.”

Payne believes that the yearbook market was a natural fit for expanding his company’s photo book offering as well as a market that was in desperate need of transformation. He explains, “The yearbook industry hasn’t changed much in a very long time. Our goal is to revolutionize and revitalize the industry through our Web applications, production capacity, and fulfillment systems.”

The Technology
By leveraging leading-edge Web app technology, print-on-demand systems, and the ability to completely personalize a yearbook in a matter of minutes, Picaboo is transforming the way that schools buy yearbooks. The company is also opening up the yearbook market to potential new customers, including clubs, teams, and practically any type of organization.

Picaboo Yearbooks enables students to create a yearbook collaboratively with easy-to-use Web-based software that manages the process every step of the way. This eliminates the need for technical or design expertise. The platform offers the ability to work from professionally designed templates that can be modified to suit the creator’s needs, or the pages can be designed from scratch. The company offers yearbooks in various sizes, styles, and price points to make them affordable to all. Books are offered in 8.5” x 11” or 9” x 12” portrait sizes, covers can be hard or soft, and even e-yearbooks are available.

In addition to the attractive flexibility of the product overall, there is no pre-order quantity commitment contract required. Consumers can order yearbooks and pay for them when they are ready, eliminating the risk of pre-ordering too few or too many. Picaboo Yearbooks can be ordered at any time, even years later. The company provides schools with a free online storefront to accept yearbook orders and payments. The efficiency of the on-demand production model allows schools to build a profit into their yearbook sales.
The Results

Yearbook advisor Arons serves as a testament to the benefits of modernizing her school’s yearbook process. Picaboo’s Web application technology and on-demand printing made the traditional processes that the school was using obsolete. She notes, ‘Picaboo Yearbooks’ Web app and on-demand capabilities met our needs, exceeded our expectations, and most importantly, gave South Lake High School students a great yearbook with no financial risk to the school. I had an easy-to-teach toolset as well as the ability to deliver a high-quality, yet affordable, product.’

According to Arons, Picaboo Yearbooks’ service offering has “totally changed the yearbook vibe at our school! My students love how easy, fun, and creative the process is, and I love how we can set our own deadlines and capture events late in the school year, such as our prom. I especially appreciate how affordable Picaboo Yearbooks are, and that we get the same great price whether we’re ordering one yearbook or a thousand. Now all of my students can enjoy a personalized yearbook that they’ll treasure for generations—and isn’t that what yearbooks are supposed to be about?”

A New Business Model

Picaboo Yearbooks is living up to its tagline of “Simplified. Personalized. On-Demand.” That tagline is also a solid and succinct descriptor of the new model that is currently reshaping the yearbook market. A breakdown of its tagline provides a closer look at Picaboo’s role in transforming the yearbook industry:

- **Simplified:** Advisors or administrators can lower time commitments by eliminating time spent on training students to use complicated software. They also benefit from the collaborative tools offered by Picaboo’s yearbook software. Advisors can lay out the design and assign sections of the yearbook to students, then non-yearbook staff can easily upload images and pages to their school’s site. Teachers can now focus on teaching journalism, photography and graphic design.

- **Personalized:** Picaboo Yearbooks’ software enables students, groups, parents, and clubs to create their own pages for inclusion in the finished book. Individuals can personalize their own books by choosing the pages and pictures that they want to appear in the yearbook. This opens the opportunity for more students to be featured in the yearbook. Picaboo offers students the ability to personalize their yearbook’s cover and four pages at no charge.

- **On-Demand:** Individuals or administrators are not required to commit to a set quantity or order within a narrow printing window. Yearbook copies can be ordered anytime at the original cost. Picaboo delivers within 3-weeks of ordering printed copies. In addition, Picaboo provides free e-yearbooks for viewing with mobile devices, with no obligation to purchase a printed version.

Picaboo Yearbooks also offers marketing and fundraising services to its customers at no cost, which helps schools and groups sell books and get others involved in the production process. Prior to launching, the company signed 80 dealer territories throughout the U.S.
and is rapidly expanding its sales territories; today Picaboo supports 116 territories and expects that number to grow to 300 this year. The company’s goal is to eventually have the entire country covered with over 500 yearbook consultants. This means that schools will have access to local service partners in their geographies. The program is open to anyone with sales and service experience who is interested in joining Picaboo Yearbooks in its journey to change the yearbook industry.

The Future: Digital and On Demand

Picaboo understands that memories matter. It is always important to preserve special events and relationships that are developed through the years. Payne concluded, “We are not just revolutionizing the yearbook industry by offering risk-free solutions and on-demand printing. This division is on a mission to give schools, churches, homeschool cooperatives, and community groups a rich option to create yearbooks and collaborative group books that fit their dynamic needs. Our pricing is extremely transparent and we give administrators the tools to get this process done faster, easier, and on time. Users do not have to be technical; virtually anyone can use the app without training. The industry is still alive and thriving, and we want to make it better and easier to capture those important moments in time.”

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About the Authors

**Barb Pellow**
Group Director
barb_pellow@infotrends.com
+1 781-616-2161

A digital printing and publishing pioneer as well as a marketing expert, Barbara Pellow helps companies develop multi-media strategies. She assists companies in creating strategies to launch new products, building strategic marketing plans, and educating their sales force on delivering value.

**Lisa Cross**
Associate Director
lisa_cross@infotrends.com
+1 781-616-2192

Lisa Cross is Associate Director of InfoTrends’ Business Development Strategies service. She is responsible for conducting market research, supporting market forecast estimates, managing custom consulting projects, and reporting on industry events.

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